

**A Review of IDRC Documentation**  
**on**  
**Network Governance, Coordination**  
**and Outcomes**

**For IDRC's Evaluation Unit**  
**and the Network Working Group**

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# Executive Summary

Research networks have been a distinctive and indispensable feature of IDRC's working since its inception. IDRC has a wealth of experience, tacit knowledge, and documentation pertaining to network development over time. The purpose of this document review, therefore, is to provide a basis for understanding the experiences pertaining to Network Governance, Coordination and Outcomes in IDRC-supported networks. This document review complements two other reviews, the *Intended Results of IDRC's Support of Networks (1995-2004)* (Adamo, 2004) and *Network Sustainability* (Wind, 2004).

The purpose of this review is to offer some preliminary discussion regarding the governance and coordination approaches used by IDRC-supported networks and how these approaches influence outcomes - networking and development. This review uses IDRC Evaluation reports, short-form Project Completion Reports, IDRC grey literature, and selected outside documents that have contributed to IDRC thinking regarding networks in the time frame 1995-2004. The design and methodology of the review have been qualitative, with data collected and analyzed in terms of a series of questions identified by the Evaluation Unit and approved by the Centre's Network Working Group. The four questions guiding this document review are: 1) What "styles" of governance have been used in IDRC-supported networks?; 2) What coordination approaches have been used in IDRC-funded networks?; 3) What outcomes have these approaches yielded in terms of *networking* and in terms of *development*?; and, 4) With these approaches, what challenges have been encountered and how have they been handled? Since the document review uses a diverse range of documentation which had been created for different purposes for IDRC, the findings for each of the above questions are preliminary.

## **Question 1: *What "style" of governance has been used in IDRC-supported networks?***

IDRC supports a variety of networks in which actors with different interests, capacities, and resources cooperate to produce any variety of outcomes. The purpose of this first study question, therefore, was to establish the "style" of governance used in IDRC-supported networks. The initial findings suggest that although a particular "style" of governance is never discussed explicitly in the documentation, the one word that most aptly captures the implicit "style" of governance in IDRC-supported networks is "flexibility". Flexibility captures the underpinning philosophy of networks that seek to provide a space that encourages consensus-building, inclusiveness, democracy, etc. As a "style" of governance, flexibility is intended to enable IDRC-supported networks to respond to and meet the changing needs and demands of their members. Given the dynamic nature of networks, however, the "style" of governance is revisited at the end of the document review, in light of the initial findings.

## **Question 2: *What coordination approaches have been used in IDRC-funded networks?***

According to the documents reviews, the coordination approaches used in IDRC-supported networks had strategic and operational dimensions. At the strategic level, the initial findings highlighted the role of **vision** as providing the core foundation that coordinated the activities of network members. At the operational level, three aspects of coordination emerged that appeared to be influential in coordinating member interactions and include: **leadership**,

## **internal management capacity, and participation.**

In terms of *leadership* the findings from the review highlight the role of the coordinator in managing, coordinating, and influencing member expectations as well as facilitating the direction of network activities. *Internal management capacity* also emerged from the review as significantly influencing contributed to coordinating network members and activities. Based on the documentation, structuring authority relations, primarily through the layering of management structures was found to enable IDRC-supported networks to manage the multiple functions and agenda of the network without the use of an extensive organizational structure. *Participation* is what makes networks different from other organizational forms (Bernard, 1996). To attract and retain the quality inputs to produce quality outputs, the preliminary findings of the document review appeared to suggest that establishing transparent and accountable processes, matching the incentive structure with an appropriate reward system, and the use of peer review were important aspects that influenced member participation and solicited quality inputs to achieve network objectives.

### **Question 3a: *What outcomes have these approaches yielded in terms of networking? and b) development?***

In reviewing the available documentation, three outcomes of networking activities that were characteristic of IDRC-supported networks emerged including: network identity, connectivity, and the types of social relationships facilitated. Based on the documents reviewed, the ability for network members to reach agreement on a common vision manifested itself in the form of a network identity. This network **identity** provided members with a sense of legitimacy and credibility for their efforts both internally and externally. While all networks establish linkages, connectivity, the review highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the levels of networking that occur (e.g. locally, regionally, nationally, globally). To facilitate networking, the initial findings suggested that intermediary institutions or processes to bridge the various levels. Information flows, both in terms of their direction and the levels of the interaction that occur between network members were also found in the review to influence networking outcomes. Finally, the document review found that the **types of relationships** that existed in IDRC-supported networks ranged from strong, personal relationships to loose partnerships. The findings also showed that underpinning any type of relationship was the role of **trust**. Building trust was a critical feature for managing user interactions.

In reviewing the growth and resource mobilization outcomes, the review found that the local context and the use of experimentation processes were influential in expanding network activities. In this regard, the initial findings suggest that networking outcomes are a function of ‘embeddedness’ and influence the specific patterns of interaction that emerge to govern and coordinate member actions and how they evolve. Further, the results suggest that the success of networks is a function of their capacity to re-embed the network in the respective social, political, economic, and thematic (research) contexts as well as to mobilize the necessary resources to achieve the networks goals and objectives.

### **Question 3b: *What outcomes have these approaches yielded in terms of development?***

The purpose of this question is to address how governance and coordination approaches discussed previously facilitated and/or impeded the process of knowledge production, sharing, dissemination and use in IDRC-supported networks. A striking outcome that

emerged from the review was the concept of **internalization**. Internalization in the experience of some IDRC-supported networks reflected the capacity of the network members to identify and develop a particular capacity that extended beyond meeting a specific policy or development objective of the network. Instead, the findings show how internalization is also a process that continues to contribute to learning and socialization activities. Although this finding is only preliminary, the finding provides an initial first step to open the black box and draws the link between the strategic intent of IDRC-supported networks and the process used to achieve development objectives. Understanding this process is important for further understanding how and why specific governance and coordination mechanisms can facilitate and/or impede network goals and objectives.

#### **Question 4: With these approaches, what challenges have been encountered and how have they been handled?**

Up to this point, the initial findings suggested that the use of networks as a modality to achieving specific goals and objectives is a complex and non-linear process. This purpose of this final question was to assess the factors that influence the approaches taken by networks and their relationship to meeting the goals and objectives of network activities. In reviewing the documentation and the findings to date what was beginning to emerge was that the successful implementation and development of a network is based on having the *adaptive capacity* to evolve over time.

In reviewing the documentation two dimensions that contribute to how adaptive capacity can be built emerged and include: **managing change** and **organizational learning**. For managing change the results of change in leadership and membership, changes in network phases, devolution, and formalizing networks, all highlighted that processes need to be in place and integrated into the overall operations of the network in order to facilitate change. For organizational learning, the preliminary results suggested that organizational learning was both a process and an outcome of networking activities. Moreover, the preliminary finding showed how learning and knowledge sharing between network members, internally and externally, tends to be the result of learning-by-doing and integrating processes, such as monitoring and evaluation, into the overall activities of the network.

#### **‘Style’ of Governance Revisited**

In answering the first study question, the reviewer suggested that, given the dynamic nature of networks, the “style” of governance should be revisited, in light of the initial findings. The tentative findings for this document review on network governance, coordination and outcomes suggest that two mutually reinforcing dynamics underpin IDRC-supported networks. First, networking activities comprise the dynamic and interactive processes that occur between network members; the social and relationship dimension. The second aspect that emerged from this document review was that the successful development and evolution of IDRC-supported networks also rely on the network itself –an arrangement that through the use of specific governance and coordination processes structures how and why network members participate in network activities.

This preliminary finding builds on the characteristics of networks set out in the terms of reference for this document review which focused on the social and relational parameters of IDRC-supported networks. From the documents reviewed, the above findings lead to a further tentative finding regarding the “style” of governance for IDRC-supported networks.

Based on the above results, it can be postulated that IDRC-supported networks aim to govern their activities on the basis of “*structured flexibility*”. That is, networks seek to ensure a minimum of formalized structure to meet the requirements for coordinating user interactions, with the flexibility of trying to ensure that networks could change and evolve as new objectives and goals are established.